

**Pastoral Letter
from the
Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand
on the
Responses to the Preparatory Document
for the Synod of Bishops on the Family (and Marriage)**



Dear sisters and brothers in Christ
E te iwi whakapono, tēnā koutou, tēnā tātou katoa.

Next month an Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops will take place in Rome.

The Preparatory Document for the Assembly, *Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization*, was received in October 2013, and included a list of questions. We decided to make the Document and the questions available in two ways: the usual way through national, diocesan and parish channels, and for the first time, online with the opportunity to provide an online response.

The questions were not the easiest to understand, and frustrated many respondents. However people persevered and gave us information which was often personal and painful to recount, and always heartfelt. We feel humble and blessed by the openness and honesty with which people responded to the questions. The responses provided us with some profound insights into how we Catholics think about and practise the faith, and we are grateful that so many of you chose to share your thoughts and experiences with us.

Themes emerged which were common to all the questions:

Respondents recognized that the Church's teaching on marriage, divorce and adultery is **the teaching of Jesus** as found in scripture.

A strong sense of exclusion and hurt is felt by many people who are living in situations not in accord with Church teaching in areas such as divorce and re-marriage, cohabitation, contraception and same sex unions. This sense of exclusion and hurt is also felt by their family and friends, and by those in the wider community who see what they consider to be the exclusion of others.

The sense of exclusion can come from one or all of the following:

- The existence of the teaching itself, which on its own is seen to exclude those who can't match the ideal.
- Hard-line un-pastoral presentation of the teaching, in a few cases by priests, but mostly by organizations or individuals who "police" the "rules".
- The attitudes of some parishioners which are perceived to be, or actually are, judgmental in relation to the life situation of others.
- A strong personal sense of failure, of "not meeting the ideal" set by the Church, and therefore a feeling of not being accepted in the Church community.

There are a number of Catholics struggling to stay in their faith community who have been deeply wounded by the judgmental and sometimes righteous attitudes of individuals and groups who see themselves as upholding or policing the Church's teaching.

At the same time those who feel excluded and hurt, or unable to “live up to the teaching” as they described it, also have a **deep sense of connection to the Church**. They spoke of “hanging on” to their faith in Jesus Christ while trying to deal with painful feelings of being excluded from the Church. Supportive Individuals (priests, parishioners and relatives) emerged as the best catalysts for strengthening their sense of belonging to the Church.

Many respondents considered that **the Church’s definition of family** implicit in the questions lacks understanding of the diverse nature of modern families. The emphasis on the family as mother, father and children has led many other family groupings to feel that in the Church’s eyes (or in the view of their faith community) their families are inferior; for example, grandparents bringing up grand children, parents bringing up children alone, families resulting from second marriages, and culturally-sanctioned adoptions within extended families.

Respondents to the questions indicated strongly that sexual abuse by clergy has undermined their faith in priests and bishops as teachers in matters of sexual morality. Many questioned the right of celibate men to “prescribe” what is right or wrong for married couples.

In both online and other submissions, gratitude and appreciation were expressed for the opportunity to contribute. A number of people were courageous in sharing personal stories which were difficult and painful, or the difficulties they have with various aspects of the Church’s teaching. Others expressed their support for the teaching and wrote about how they tried to be faithful to it in their families. **We were deeply impressed by the way in which people are striving to live according to the gospel, whatever the circumstances of their lives.**

In the responses there was a strong undercurrent of hope that those whose lives are in conflict with Church teaching would again feel at home in the Church, and that those who feel burdened by Church teaching might have their load lessened in some way.

We have taken very seriously the task of conveying your thoughts to the Holy See, and have been anxious to know if what people across the world are saying is truly being heard by those who will organise the Synod Assembly. Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri is the Secretary-General of the Synod of Bishops, and it is his office which is responsible for analysing the submissions on the Preparatory Document. He said in an interview that the responses show “much suffering, especially by those who feel excluded or abandoned by the Church because they find themselves in a state of life that does not correspond to the Church’s doctrine and discipline”.

The results compiled by the bishops’ conferences, he said, show “the urgency of recognising the lived reality of the people and of beginning a pastoral dialogue with those who have distanced themselves from the Church for various reasons”.

There is a huge responsibility resting on Pope Francis and those who take part in both the Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod this year and the Ordinary Assembly next year. The Synod needs the support of sustained prayer, something we can all participate in, individually and in our parishes. Please pray also for Archbishop John Dew who will represent us at the Synod Assembly.

The responses received to the Synod questions challenge us all to do some things now, here in Aotearoa New Zealand, without waiting for the Extraordinary Assembly and the Assembly to follow in 2015. The responses to the questions revealed that in our parishes we are hurting one another, and beyond our parishes there are people who have left because they felt like second-class Catholics due to their particular situation. Pope Francis has spoken often about judging others. He continually encourages us to focus on God's mercy and love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and acceptance of one another with all our faults.

“What kind of love do we bring to others? Is it the love of Jesus that shares, that forgives, that accompanies... What are the relationships like in our parishes, in our communities? Do we treat each other like brothers and sisters? Or do we judge one another, do we speak evil of one another, do we just tend our own vegetable patch? Or do we care for one another? These are the questions of charity!”

Pope Francis, General Audience, 23 October 2013

This is where we must start now, in all of our interactions with one another, here in our own communities. We do not have to wait for the Synod Assembly in order to start bringing about change.

Yours sincerely in Christ

✠John Dew
Archbishop of Wellington
President, NZCBC

✠Patrick Dunn
Bishop of Auckland
Secretary, NZCBC

✠Denis Browne
Bishop of Hamilton

✠ Colin Campbell
Bishop of Dunedin

✠Charles Drennan
Bishop of Palmerston North

✠Barry Jones
Bishop of Christchurch

✠ Peter Cullinane
Emeritus Bishop of Palmerston North

This document is available on the Diocesan website www.pn.catholic.org.nz

Note: a full summary of the responses is available from communications@nzcbc.org.nz, or from the NZCBC Communications Adviser, P O Box 1937, Wellington 6140.